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AUTHOR Vallery, Arlee
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ABSTRACT

Increasing numbers of families from foreign countries reside temporarily or permanently in the United States. These "international families" are enrolling infants and toddlers in child care programs. In many such programs, the diversity of countries and languages represented presents a challenge for creating an integrated, cohesive group. To learn about and interact with culturally different persons in a nonstereotyped way, service providers are faced with the necessity of adopting a world view. Careful staff planning can enhance the success of multicultural preschool programs. Attention should be given to the following questions: Are all center policies in writing, and are they easily understood by adults with limited comprehension of English? What arrangements can be made to help the non-English-speaking child adjust? What can be done to assist children and staff in understanding and accepting cultural differences in dress, food habits, and religious customs? What support services does the community offer for international students and families? This paper includes suggestions for helping young children adjust, cites publications containing guidelines for promoting multicultural education, lists resources for observing families, and presents a set of problems and solutions to consider in center policy formation. (RH)

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UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING WITH INFANTS AND TODDLERS OF INTERNATIONAL FAMILIES IN GROUP CARE

Arlee Vallery

College campuses, small towns, rural areas, and big cities are all experiencing international families who have taken up temporary or permanent residence. This recent influx has come about as colleges/universities recruit and admit more international students to their undergraduate/graduate programs or English Language Institutes. The medical community recruited doctors and nurses to ease shortages. Cooperative international ventures by industries have also brought in multicultural families. Churches and individuals have sponsored refugee families. Many of these families, particularly student families, are admitted for a definite period of time and will be returning to their own countries. A commonality among most of these international families is that English is a second language and is usually read with more understanding than spoken or interpreted in conversations.

Many books and articles were written in the decade of the seventies on "multicultural teaching," particularly for application at the elementary school level. Many ideas from these writings can be incorporated into planning programs for older preschool children. However, the current influx of international families presents a need for a further look at some aspects of serving these families in preschool child care programs. These aspects are: (1) international families are enrolling infants and toddlers in child care programs; (2) the diversity of the countries and languages represented in many child care programs are a challenge to integrate into a cohesive group; and (3) a world view makes it imperative to learn about and interact with other cultures without accepting sterotypes.

These international families are generally characterized by a high educational level and aspirations for themselves and their children. They are

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interested in learning and understanding the American culture, as well as the English language. They also want to retain their native language and many customs of their cultures including foods, religions, values, and cultural approaches to child rearing. Professionals in child care programs are being challenged to facilitate retention of native customs while assisting in their adaptation to the American culture.

Reasons expressed by International families for enrolling infants, toddlers, and preschool children in child care programs are generally the same reasons given by American families.

1. Both parents are attending classes or working and need care for the children.
2. The parents need relief from the full-time responsibility of child care.
3. The parents are very interested in educational experiences for their preschool children.
4. The parents want their children to have an opportunity to play with other children.
5. The parents want their children to learn English at an early age.

Careful staff planning can enhance the success of multi-cultural programs. Both positive aspects and potential problems need to be discussed by the staff. Positive benefits to a center would include:

1. The center can provide an opportunity for children and adults to learn respect for others regardless of race or ethnic origin.
2. Contact with international children and families brings the world to where you live.

3. Working with international children and families promotes world understanding as new views of other nations and their peoples are gained.

These positive benefits can be promoted to staff, parents, and children in such a way that all feel more knowledgable about each other. The questions and specific problems discussed in the remainder of this paper are all aspects that need staff attention as a part of promoting the positive benefits. As you review your situation in regard to the following four questions, ideas to enhance the positive benefits will be a part of your thinking and discussion.

A. Are all policies of the center in writing and are they easily understood by adults with limited understanding of English?

Most state licensing requires a written policy for each center. The policy should be very specific. It is important to schedule an uninterrupted time and go over it with international parents, preferably with an interpreter present. Encourage parents to ask questions until all aspects of the policy are clearly understood. Keep in mind these suggestions in talking with adults learning a new language. Speak slowly, watch for cues which indicate confusion, and clarify whenever possible. Slang, colloquialisms, and words with many meanings are particularly exasperating. A person learning a new language will often answer "yes" simply to be agreeable. She/he doesn't want to inconvenience you yet another time for an explanation. Have parents repeat the information. This way you'll know they have gotten it right and are not just answering "yes" to be polite.

B. What arrangements can be made to help the non-English speaking child adjust?

International children entering child care for the first time have all the problems that American children have in adjusting. In addition, they have to learn to understand and speak English, taste new foods, and experience a very different

cultural expectation of young children. Many cultures do not begin training young children to be independent from the moment of birth as our American culture does. Some cultures are very permissive with children until they reach the age of six years. There are also individual variations within each culture, just as American parents are variable in their approaches to child rearing. In our experience, international children under three years of age have experienced a difficult and prolonged adjustment period when enrolled in all English speaking programs. Specific suggestions for helping young children adjust includes the following:

1. Assign one staff member to have all the interactions with the child so the child can form an attachment to that person. Let the child stay with her as she attends to other children.
2. Ask the parents to teach the staff a few key words of their language, such as the words for toileting, water, momma, etc.
3. Plan the center menu to include some food that the child is familiar with and likes.
4. Find one activity that the child enjoys, e.g., watching the fish in an aquarium and spend time with the child doing that activity.
5. Be very warm and loving with the child.
6. Use gestures, one word sentences, and always name objects so the child begins to understand routine English words.
7. Recruit volunteers who understand the child's language to come in for part of the day at first.
8. Make a home visit.

C. <u>What can be done to assist children and staff in understanding and accepting cultural differences in dress, food habits, and religious customs</u>?

The first step in understanding other cultures is to show an interest in and acceptance of the culture. Incorporating aspects of other cultures in

your program and center is easily accomplished in older preschool groups. Native clothes and objects from the nationalities of children in your center can be displayed. International parents can be encouraged to bring native dishes for picnic suppers, birthdays, and holidays. Some aspects of cultural differences take time, patience, and open communication between staff and international parents. Local libraries have books on many countries. Two publications, Understanding the Multicultural Experience in Early Childhood Education and Resources For Creative Teaching In Early Childhood Education, have many suggestions. Ideas from books written for teachers of elementary schools can be simplified and included in programs for preschool children.

D. What support services does the community offer for international students/families?

Besides the resources available for American families, many towns/cities have additional ones to assist international families. Here are some that are available at The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa and in the city.

Rotary International House

Spanish House for American and Spanish speaking students

French House for American and French speaking students

German House for American and German speaking students

Tuscaloosans for International Understanding

English language class at the Baptist Student Center

International Student Office

English Language Institute

Sixteen Organizations for students from different countries, e.g. Venezuelan Student Organization, Chinese Student Organization

Japanese/American exchange

Korean National Church

Jaycee Sister City Program

High School Student Exchange Program

Even with careful planning and discussion of the four general questions discussed above, specific problems will come up. Problems in working with international families which our centers have encountered and our solutions include the following. Child care center staff may find these helpful in their discussions and formulation of policies.

PROBLEM: An international family goes to their native country for six weeks. What will the charges be for child care during this absence?

SOLUTION: Determine a fee that all parents can pay to hold a place in the group for their child if the child is to be out for an extended period.

PROBLEM: International students often run into difficulty getting funds out of their country to pay for child care (or their own tuition).

SOLUTION: Check with your college's Office of International Students. They usually are aware of any country that is not releasing funds to students. Can your center provide assistantships so parents can work off part or all of their tutition?

PROBLEM: While the parents were attending an English Language Institute, their one year old child was enrolled in a day care. A teacher mentioned that she would like to have them for dinner at her home while they were here. Later, the parents commented to the staff that the teacher didn't like them because she hadn't given an invitation with a specific date.

SOLUTION: All directions should be concrete and simple. The exact place, the precise time, how long you expect the guest to stay, how long it will take to get there, are items of concern. A written note giving information about anything you are planning or information need is easier for non-English speaking parents.

PROBLEM: International Families have difficulty getting records of children's immunizations from their countries.

SOLUTION: Get a statement signed by a local physician regarding the immunization status.

PROBLEM: Kim Yoo (aged two years) had great difficulty accepting that her mother was going to leave her, even though her mother had stayed with her the first month and for short periods during the next two weeks.

SOLUTION: Have the mother leave something of the mother's, e.g., her purse, with the child. If the child does not make progress in adjusting after a month, see if you can help the parents find a day care home.

PROBLEM: A four year old child was running a temperature of 102°. The mother took him to a doctor but was agast when the doctor prescribed antibiotics for tonsillitis. The mother uses herb remedies handed down through generations to treat such illnesses.

SOLUTION: Accept ideas that may differ from our cultural approach when the child's health is not in danger.

PROBLEM: A six week old infant's diet included pureed rice which the mother had added to the formula.

SOLUTION: Discuss nutritional needs of young children with the parents. Some food differences are just cultural differences and are not harmful to the children.

PROBLEM: Some cultures/religions do not eat some foods normally served in American menues, e.g., pork.

SOLUTION: Send copies of the menu for the week home so the mother can pack his lunch on those days or mark the foods that would be acceptable.

It will be obvious that many of the problems of working with international children and families are similar to those encountered in any preschool program. A warm, friendly, loving staff who values each child and seeks ways to support the family unit will experience personal growth and also promote international understanding.

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